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Re-Thinking Terrorism in Light of a War on Terrorism

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RE-THINKING TERRORISM IN LIGHT OF A WAR ON TERRORISM

Testimony of Dr. Bruce Hoffman

**Vice President, External Affairs, and
Director, RAND Washington Office**

**Before the Subcommittee on Terrorism and Homeland Security
House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence
U.S. House of Representatives**

September 26, 2001

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RE-THINKING TERRORISM IN LIGHT OF A WAR ON TERRORISM

**Statement of Bruce Hoffman,*
Vice President, External Affairs and
Director, RAND Washington Office**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the privilege and opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee as it begins its important deliberations on this critical issue.

THE 9/11 ATTACKS IN CONTEXT

Until last Tuesday, terrorists either in this country or abroad had killed no more than approximately 1,000 Americans total, since 1968. The enormity and sheer scale of the simultaneous suicide attacks of September 11th dwarf anything we have previously seen—either individually or in aggregate. Indeed, by the time the rubble and debris is cleared from New York City's World Trade Center, the collapsed walls of the Pentagon are stabilized and the last of the bodies are retrieved from the field in rural Pennsylvania where a fourth suicide aircraft crashed, the death toll is likely to be exponentially higher. Accordingly, for that reason alone, the events of September 11th argue for nothing less than a re-configuration of both our thinking about terrorism and of our national security architecture as well. Such a change is amply justified by the unique constellation of operational capabilities evident in that day's tragic attacks: showing a level of planning, professionalism and tradecraft rarely seen among the vast majority of terrorists and terrorist movements we have known.¹ Among the most significant characteristics of the operation were its:

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¹Nor is this a particularly "American-centric" view in reaction to the stunning and tragic events of two weeks ago. For example, an old friend and colleague, who is one of Israel's leading counterterrorist experts, and who has long experience in military, the government and academe was totally shocked by the September 11th attacks—specifically, their coordination, daring and lethality—remarking: "Never could I have imagined that terrorists could or would do that" (telephone conversation, 17 September 2001). I am also reminded of a conversation with a senior, highly decorated Sri Lankan Armed Forces brigade

- ambitious scope and dimensions;
- consummate coordination and synchronization;
- professionalism and tradecraft that kept so large an operation so secret; and
- the unswerving dedication and determination of the 19 aircraft hijackers who willingly and wantonly killed themselves, the passengers and crews of the four aircraft they commandeered and the thousands of the persons working or visiting both the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

To give you some idea of the significance of the September 11th incidents from a terrorist operational perspective, simultaneous attacks—using far more prosaic and arguably conventional means of attack (such as car bombs, for example)—are relatively uncommon. For reasons not well understood, terrorists typically have not undertaken such coordinated operations. This was doubtless less of a choice than a reflection of the logistical and other organizational hurdles that most terrorist groups are not able to overcome. Indeed, this was one reason why we were so galvanized by the synchronized attacks on the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam three years ago. The orchestration of that operation, coupled with its unusually high death and casualty tolls, stood out in a way that, until September 11th, few other terrorists had: bringing bin Laden as much renown as infamy in many quarters. During the 1990s, perhaps only one other (presumably unrelated) terrorist incident evidenced those same characteristics of coordination and high lethality: the series of attacks that occurred in Bombay in March 1993, where a dozen or so simultaneous car bombings rocked the city, killing nearly 300 persons and wounding more than 700 others.² Indeed, apart from the IRA's near simultaneous assassination of Lord Mounbatten and remote-control mine attack on British troops in Warrenpoint, Northern Ireland in 1979, it is hard to recall many other significant incidents reflecting such operational expertise.

commander and military intelligence operative who once explained in great detail the "difficulties of pulling off even a successful, significant terrorist attack" (discussion, Batticola, Sri Lanka, December 1997)—not least the four orchestrated suicide aircraft hijackings and three crashes that occurred on September 11th.

²Celia W. Dugger, "Victims of '93 Bombay Terror Wary of U.S. Motives," *New York Times*, 24 September 2001.

Accordingly, we were perhaps lulled into believing that mass, simultaneous attacks in general and those of such devastating potential as we saw in New York and Washington on September 11th were likely beyond most capabilities of most terrorists—including those directly connected to or associated with Usama bin Laden. The tragic events of two weeks ago demonstrate how profoundly misplaced such assumptions were. In this respect, we perhaps overestimated the significance of our past successes (e.g., in largely foiling most of bin Laden's terrorist operations from the August 1998 embassy bombings to the November 2000 attack on the *U.S.S. Cole*) and the terrorists' own incompetence and propensity for mistakes (e.g., Ahmad Ressam's bungled attempt to enter the United States from Canada in December 1999). Indeed, both more impressive and disturbing is the fact that there was likely considerable overlap in the planning for these attacks and the one last November against the *U.S.S. Cole* in Aden: thus suggesting a multi-track operational and organizational capability to coordinate major, multiple attacks at one time.

Attention was also arguably focused too exclusively either on the low-end threat posed by car and truck bombs against buildings or the more exotic high-end threats, involving biological or chemical weapons or cyber-attacks. The implicit assumptions of much of our planning scenarios on mass casualty attacks were that they would involve germ or chemical agents or result from widespread electronic attacks on critical infrastructure and that any conventional or less extensive incident could be addressed simply by planning for the most catastrophic threat. This left a painfully vulnerable gap in our anti-terrorism defenses where a traditional and long-proven tactic—like airline hijacking—was neglected in favor of other, less conventional threats and the consequences of using an aircraft as a suicide weapon seem to have been almost completely discounted. In retrospect, it was not the 1995 sarin nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway that should have been the dominant influence on our counterterrorist thinking, but the December 1994 hijacking in Algiers of an Air France passenger plane by terrorists belonging to the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). Their plan was to crash the fuel-laden aircraft with its passengers into the heart of Paris. The lesson here is not that we need to be unrealistically omniscient, but rather that we need to consider the entire range of potential attacks and not just those at the extreme end of the technological spectrum.

We also had long consoled ourselves—and had only recently begun to question and debate the notion—that terrorists were more interested in publicity than killing and therefore had neither the need nor interest in annihilating large numbers of people. For

decades, there was widespread acceptance of the observation made famous by Brian Jenkins in 1975 that, "Terrorists want a lot of people watching and a lot of people listening and not a lot of people dead."³ Even despite the events of the mid-1980s—when a series of high-profile and particularly lethal suicide car and truck-bombings were directed against American diplomatic and military targets in the Middle East (in one instance resulting in the deaths of 241 Marines)—many analysts saw no need to revise these arguments. In 1985, Jenkins, one of the most perspicacious and acute observers of this phenomenon, again noted that, "simply killing a lot of people has seldom been one terrorist objective . . . Terrorists operate on the principle of the minimum force necessary. They find it unnecessary to kill many, as long as killing a few suffices for their purposes."⁴ The events of September 11th prove such notions now to be wishful thinking, if not dangerously anachronistic.

Finally, bin Laden himself has re-written the history of both terrorism and probably of the post-Cold War era—which he arguably single-handedly ended on September 11th. At a time when the forces of globalization, coupled with economic determinism, seemed to have submerged the role the individual charismatic leader of men beneath far more powerful, impersonal forces, bin Laden has cleverly cast himself (admittedly and inadvertently with our assistance) as a David against the American Goliath: one man standing up to the world's sole remaining superpower and able to challenge its might and directly threaten its citizens. To his followers, who may well be growing in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, bin Laden has proven to be the fabled right man in the right place at the right time: possessing the vision, financial resources, organizational skills and flair for self-promotion to meld together the disparate strands of Islamic fervor, Muslim piety and general enmity towards the West into a formidable global force.

Given these profound changes and development both in the nature of terrorism as we know it and the salient threat now so clearly posed to the United States, how should we begin to organize for "a war on terrorism"? What the U.S. requires is a strategy, a comprehensive understanding of the threat in all its dimensions, and—both to support and help implement these concerted efforts—a reconfigured national security architecture.

³Brian Michael Jenkins, "International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict" in David Carlton and Carlo Schaerf (eds.), *International Terrorism and World Security* (London: Croom Helm, 1975), p. 15.

⁴Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Likelihood of Nuclear Terrorism* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, P-7119, July 1985), p. 6.

A CLEAR, COMPREHENSIVE AND COHERENT STRATEGY

It is inaccurate if not delusory to write off the tragic events of September 11th simply as an intelligence failure. The problem is more complex and systemic than a deficiency of any single agency or component of our national security structure. Indeed, it goes beyond the United States and implicates the intelligence and security services of many of our closest allies in Europe and elsewhere as well. But most importantly, it manifestly underscores the conspicuous absence of a national overarching strategy. As the Gilmore Commission noted in its first annual report to the President and the Congress in December 1999, the promulgation of a succession of policy documents and presidential decision directives⁵ neither equates to, nor can substitute for, a truly "comprehensive, fully coordinated national strategy."⁶ In this respect, the variety of Federal agencies and programs concerned with counterterrorism still remain painfully fragmented and uncoordinated; with overlapping responsibilities, and lacking clear focus.

The articulation and development of such a strategy, as I have argued in other testimony before Congress,⁷ is not simply an intellectual exercise, but must be at the foundation of any effective counterterrorism policy. Failure to do so historically has undermined the counterterrorism efforts of other democratic nations: producing frustratingly ephemeral, if not sometimes, nugatory effects and, in some cases, proving counterproductive in actually reducing the threat. Accordingly, as the September 11th attacks demonstrate, the continued absence of a national strategy seriously undermines our ability to effectively counter terrorism. What is now therefore clearly needed is a comprehensive effort that seeks to knit together more tightly, and provide greater organizational guidance and focus, to the formidable array of capabilities and instruments the U.S. can bring to bear in the struggle against terrorism.

REGULAR FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC TERRORIST THREAT ASSESSMENTS

A critical prerequisite in framing such an integrated national strategy is the tasking of a comprehensive net assessment of the terrorist threat, both foreign and domestic, as it exists today and is likely to evolve in the future.⁸ The failure to conduct such

⁵e.g., the "Five Year Interagency Counter-Terrorism Plan" and PDDs 39, 62 and 63.

⁶The Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities For Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction, *I. Assessing the Threat*, 15 December 1999, p. 56.

⁷ Bruce Hoffman, "Combating Terrorism: In Search of A National Strategy," 27 March 2001. This can be accessed at <http://www.rand.org/publications/CT/CT175/CT175.pdf>.

⁸This same argument has been made repeatedly by Henry L. Hinton, Jr., Assistant Comptroller General, National Security and International Affairs Division, U.S. General Accounting Office, before the

comprehensive net assessments on a more regular basis is palpable. For example, the last comprehensive national intelligence estimate (NIE) regarding foreign terrorist threats in the United States—a prospective, forward-looking effort to predict and anticipate future terrorist trends directed at this country—was conducted in 1997. In light of last week’s events, it is clear that a re-assessment was long overdue. Indeed, the last, formal, comprehensive foreign terrorist assessment astonishingly was undertaken at the time of the 1990/91 Gulf War—nearly a decade ago. Although a new one was tasked this past summer and presumably was in the process of being finalized in recent weeks, given the profound changes in the nature, operations and mindset of terrorists we have seen in recent years, such an estimate was long overdue. Although the National Intelligence Council’s wide-ranging *Global Trends 2015* effort, published in December 2000, was a positive step in this direction, surprisingly minimal attention was paid to terrorism, in the published open-source version at least.⁹

INTELLIGENCE REFORM AND REORGANIZATION

We also need to be much more confident than we are that the U.S. intelligence community is correctly configured to counter the terrorist threats of today and tomorrow rather than yesterday. Our national security architecture is fundamentally a cold war-era artifice, created more than half a century ago to counter a specific threat from a specific country and a specific ideology. That architecture, which is oriented overwhelmingly towards military threats and hence to gathering military intelligence, was proven anachronistic with last Tuesday’s devastating attacks carried out by non-state/non-military adversaries. However, its structure remains fundamentally unchanged since the immediate post-World War II period. An estimated 60% of the intelligence community’s efforts, for example, are still focused on military intelligence pertaining to the standing

Subcommittee on National Security, Veterans Affairs, and International Relations, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives in (1) “Combating Terrorism: Observation on Federal Spending to Combat Terrorism,” 11 March 1999; and (2) “Combating Terrorism: Observation on the Threat of Chemical and Biological Terrorism,” 20 October 1999; as well as by John Parachini in “Combating Terrorism: Assessing the Threat” before the same House subcommittee on 20 October 1999; and the Hinton testimony “Combating Terrorism: Observation on Biological Terrorism and Public Health Initiatives,” before the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs and Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee, Senate Committee on Appropriations, GAO/T-NSIAD-99-12, General Accounting Office Washington, D.C., 16 March 1999.

⁹National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2015: A Dialogue About the Future With Non-government Experts*, December 2000.

armed forces of established nation-states.¹⁰ Eight of the 13 agencies responsible for intelligence collection report directly to the Secretary of Defense (who also controls their budgets) rather than to the Director of Central Intelligence.¹¹ It is not surprising therefore that American's HUMINT (human intelligence) assets have proven so anemic given a military orientation that ineluctably feeds on technological intelligence such as MASINT (measurement and signature intelligence), ELINT (electronic intelligence) and SIGNINT (signals intelligence) collected by spy satellites orbiting the planet. Given the emergence of formidable, transnational, non-state adversaries, and the lethally destructive threats that they clearly pose, this balance is no longer appropriate. Moreover, our own HUMINT deficiencies, which forced us to rely on information provided or forthcoming from liaison services, has clearly been shown to be wanting in the wake of the failure of any of our allies to provide warning of the September 11th operations.

Indeed the emergence of a range of new adversaries, with different aims and motivations, that operate on a flat, more linear basis involving networks rather than stove-piped, rigid command and control hierarchies, underscores the need for a redistribution of our intelligence collection efforts traditional military intelligence threats to the spectrum of enigmatic, non-traditional, non-military and non-state adversaries who now clearly pose a salient threat to our national security. The U.S. intelligence community's roughly \$30 billion budget is already greater than the national defense budgets of all but six countries in world.¹² Accordingly, a redistribution of emphasis, personnel, budgets and resources is needed to ensure that the U.S. is fully capable of responding to both current and future terrorist threats. At the very minimum, funding of key elements of our current counterterrorism efforts should be re-oriented towards providing sustained, multi-year budgets that will encourage the development of longer-term, systematic approaches, as opposed to the current year-to-year process.

¹⁰Richard Stubbing, "Improving The Output of Intelligence Priorities, Managerial Changes and Funding," in Craig Eisendrath (ed.), *National Insecurity: U.S. Intelligence After the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), pp. 176 & 183.

¹¹ Reporting to Secretary of Defense: 1. Defense Intelligence Agency, J-2 (through the Joint Chiefs of Staff); 2. Nine Unified/Regional Commands intelligence units; 3. Assistant Secretary for the Air Force for Space; 4. National Reconnaissance Office; 5. National Security Agency; 6. National Imagery and Mapping Agency; 7. Individual services' intelligence divisions (e.g., Deputy Chief of Intelligence, US Army; Chief of Naval Intelligence; US Air Force Intelligence); and, 8. Assistant Secretary of Defense's Office for C(3) I (Command, Control, Communications, Coordination and Intelligence).

Reporting to Director, Central Intelligence: 1. CIA; 2. State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research; 3. Justice Department/FBI, National Security Division; 4. Treasury Department, Office of Intelligence Support; and 5. Energy Department, Office of Energy Intelligence.

¹²Stubbing, "Improving The Output of Intelligence Priorities," p. 172.

The country's anachronistic intelligence architecture has also created a dangerous gap in our national defenses. The CIA, of course, is responsible for foreign intelligence collection and assessment and by law is prohibited from operating within the U.S. Domestic counterterrorism, accordingly, falls within the purview of the FBI. The FBI, however, is primarily a law enforcement and investigative agency, not an intelligence agency. Moreover, its investigative activities embrace a broad spectrum—perhaps too broad a spectrum—that includes kidnapping, bank robberies, counter-espionage, serial killings and other even more prosaic crimes, in addition to countering terrorism. The time may be ripe for some new, “out-of-the-box” thinking that would go beyond simple bureaucratic fixes and embrace a radical re-structuring of our domestic counter-terrorism capabilities. For example, just as the narcotics problem is regarded in the U.S. as so serious a problem and so a great a threat to our national security that we have a separate, uniquely oriented, individual agency specifically dedicated to counter-narcotics—the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA)—we should consider creating a similar organization committed exclusively to counter-terrorism.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Based on a firm appreciation of terrorism threats, both foreign and domestic, an overarching strategy should now be developed that ensures that the U.S. is capable of responding across the *entire* technological spectrum of potential adversarial attacks. The focus of U.S. counterterrorism policy in recent years has arguably been too weighted towards the “high end” threats from biological and chemical weapons and was based mainly on planning for extreme worst case scenarios.¹³ This approach seemed to assume that, by focusing on “worst case” scenarios involving these more exotic weapons, any less serious incident involving a different, even less sophisticated, though still highly lethal weapon, could be addressed simply by planning for the most catastrophic event.

¹³This argument has similarly been expressed by Henry L. Hinton, Jr., Assistant Comptroller General, National Security and International Affairs Division, U.S. General Accounting Office, Before the Subcommittee on National Security, Veterans Affairs, and International Relations, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives in (1) “Combating Terrorism: Observation on Federal Spending to Combat Terrorism,” 11 March 1999; and (2) “Combating Terrorism: Observation on the Threat of Chemical and Biological Terrorism,” 20 October 1999; as well as by John Parachini in “Combating Terrorism: Assessing the Threat” and Brian Michael Jenkins in their respective testimony before the same House subcommittee on 20 October 1999.; and the Hinton testimony “Combating Terrorism: Observation on Biological Terrorism and Public Health Initiatives,” before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs and Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee, Senate Committee on Appropriations, GAO/T-NSIAD-99-12, General Accounting Office Washington, D.C., 16 March 1999.

Such an assumption ignored the possibility that non-WMD high-casualty incidents, might present unique challenges of their own—such as we have seen in New York and at the Pentagon.

Finally, it should be noted that none of the changes proposed in this testimony are quick fixes or magically conjured solutions to complex and longstanding problems. They all require time, resources and most of all political will and patience. Results will not come quickly. But by taking a comprehensive approach to the terrorist problem and fashioning a cohesive strategy to address it, the U.S. can avoid repeating the mistakes that facilitated last Tuesday's tragic events. The struggle against terrorism is never-ending. Similarly, our search for solutions and new approaches must be continuous and unyielding, proportional to the threat posed by our adversaries in both innovation and determination.